Urban Life is Breath of Fresh Air
06 Feb 2003

Emissions from cars are responsible for most air pollution in London

@Freefoto.com

According to new government figures, 2002 saw another improvement in the nation's air quality. Figures just released by the Department for the Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) show that the average number of days where pollution was average or high fell from 24 to 14 days for urban areas and from 30 to 23 days for rural areas.

The government's pollution index, known as the air quality headline, measures concentrations of carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, ozone and fine particles. These pollutants are recognised as the most important cause of short term health effects. The measurements recorded at locations in urban and rural areas are classified according to the Air Pollution Information Service bandings.

The improvement in urban air quality reflects a long term trend as the number of days classified with moderate or high levels of pollution has fallen from 59 days in 1993. The trend exhibited by rural areas is more variable since pollution can be displaced from Europe or UK urban areas to rural areas by weather systems.

It should be remembered that although urban air appears to be less polluted than rural areas, the pollution found in cities is more damaging as a higher proportion of people live and work in urban areas. Also, the higher pollution in rural areas is mainly caused by ozone. This pollution is catalysed by warm summer weather. Contrastingly, the pollution in cities is evenly distributed throughout the year.

However, it was not all good news. DEFRA also revealed that 62% of the nation's 300 local authorities are not honouring their commitment to enforce air pollution regulations. This includes 48 authorities such as Sheffield and Leeds who fail to inspect air quality once a year. However, some local authorities carry out more than the two mandatory inspections. This includes Swansea Bay who carries out 16 inspections a year.